

Beyond this Point, Nothing Is Fiction

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'The institution is always made up, and hence it could have been made up differently.'¹

1. Daniel Blanga-Gubbay and Livia Andrea Piazza, 'Fictional Institutions – On Radical Imagination', in Elke van Campenhout, Florian Malzacher and Lilia Mestre (eds.): *Turn, turtle! Reenacting the Institute*. Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2016, p. 44.

2. Lucas Sonnemann: *Manual des fiktiven Films*. Hamburg: Material Verlag – HfbK, 'Material: 371', 2006.

3. Jozef Wouters, *Zoological Institute for Recently Extinct Species*, 2013.

In his *Handbook of Fictional Films*,² Lukas Sonnemann identifies and documents for the first time over 800 'imaginary films', in other words, feature-length films to which reference is made in some documentary source but which do not in fact exist. Each and every one of these films, which the author enumerates over 160 pages, has been located in particular sources, references to which appear suitably indicated alongside each title, just as they would in any erudite publication. At first sight, there is nothing in this book — or its formal characteristics: hardbound in grey cloth and laid out in a classic style with a sober typeface — to suggest that Sonnemann's *Handbook* is not what it seems to be: a clever piece of research.

Things grow complicated, however, when it becomes clear as we read on that the sources that mention the films share a startling characteristic: they are all, without exception, works of fiction — literature, film and television — that range from episodes of *The Simpsons* to feature-length movies in the *Star Wars* saga, novels by David Foster Wallace and *anime* films such as *Paprika*, by Satoshi Kon. Moreover, in the opening pages of the *Handbook*, it is revealed that the book was published in a print run of just a hundred copies, and by a publishing imprint that is part of the University of Fine Arts Hamburg and known for specialising in artist's books.

So, this is not an essay book, as at first sight it would appear to be, but an artist's book that documents references to non-existent films mentioned in works of fiction. This categorisation overturns certainties and raises many doubts: how much of what is in this book is real and how much is imaginary? What is the plane of reality documented by the *Handbook*? Do the references to imaginary films that Sonnemann has recorded in it really exist or has he simply made them up? Plus, what does *really exist* mean in this context? Do the stories told in literature, film and television *really exist*, even though they are situated on the same level of fiction as the films whose titles Sonnemann has painstakingly compiled? Is this a work of *fiction*?

The tangle of the various degrees of fictionality embodied by the *Handbook of Fictional Films* may seem *recherché* and deliberately artificial. But perhaps this is not entirely the case. On the contrary, in many respects it illustrates with great clarity the inextricable relations and overlappings of reality and fiction on the various planes we humans navigate our way through every day, often largely heedlessly.

Let us consider another example, one closer to the world of art.

In 2013, the Belgian artist and scenographer Jozef Wouters conceived his *Zoological Institute for Recently Extinct Species*,³ an installation intended to be shown as an exhibition in one of the wings of the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Science in Brussels. According to the accounts of Daniel Blanga-Gubbay and Livia Andrea Piazza, visitors would arrive at the installation, consisting of images and documents arranged in a display more or less comparable with the register employed in the natural sciences, after they had come through exhibition rooms in which the museum's collection, articulated in the same kind of display, was shown. Given this coincidence, and in response to the fear of the confusion that might arise between the permanent collection and the temporary exhibition, the institute insisted that a sign be put up at the entrance to Wouters' installation, indicating that 'a fictional area of the museum' began at that point. On that sign, as Blanga-Gubbay and Piazza rightly point out, the word 'fictional' was not in fact being used in its original sense of 'imaginary' but rather as a synonym of

'made-up', 'constructed', almost going so far as 'fake', which immediately bounces the question back: 'is not the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Science fictional as well?'⁴

The answer is, of course, yes. Just like other institutions created by human beings — the only living creatures to have equipped themselves with an 'institutional apparatus' — the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Science and all other museums are underpinned by fiction, which we do not generally refer to in this context using this term but rather that of 'convention'. And not just museums: states, churches, banks, money and all other human institutions are conventions, that is to say, fictions. As we believe in their existence and accept that they function in a certain way — we give them credit — all these institutions in turn exist, they are real, which is not in the slightest in contradiction with their fictional nature. Sonnemann's *Handbook* and Wouters' *Zoological Institute* exist as well, just as *The Simpsons* and the *Star Wars* saga are real.

If we untangle this skein a little more to follow the thread of this reasoning, we can see that the 'museum' institution, as a convention (fiction), has equipped itself — like a bank, state or church — with a series of formulae, codes and signs that define it, that make it intelligible and explain its workings. From this perspective, the museum-fiction can be regarded as a text which, like any other text, would be indecipherable were it not to come with paratextual elements that indicate how it is to be read. Within the museum, these paratexts include, by way of examples, exhibition titles, opening hours and direction signs in exhibition rooms. These are components situated in an "undefined zone" between the inside and the outside⁵ of the institution, whose dual nature combines traits of the container and of the content. Naturally, credits pages number among these paratextual elements.

It is easy to suppose that credits pages have the doubtful honour of being the section in catalogues that kindle the least interest among their readers (or 'leafers'). Even so, these pages in fact constitute quite a complex paratext. At first sight, one might say they are almost an exercise in conceptual writing: long lists of epigraphs and names that resist being read, so much so that they almost immediately and automatically switch off the reader's attention. (If you don't believe me, try reading any credits page aloud and see for yourself.) Anyone who persists in the task of consulting or reading a credits page straightaway detects the laudable mission assigned to this section of the book, which is to recognise — to give credit — to the people who have contributed to the creation and production of an exhibition or publication. In the credits, the museum-fiction, which tends to employ the impersonal tone of hackneyed expressions such as 'the museum will open its doors' or 'the institution will release a communiqué', adopts, in an almost exceptional way, a human face.

But that's not all. In their deep structure, these pages chart a terrain in which extremely bloody battles are waged.

The first of these clashes occurs when the institutional fiction goes down one route and reality — which the said fiction would like to superimpose itself on flawlessly, leaving no cracks — is bent upon going down another, in other words: when the distribution of tasks on paper is very different to real life. The consequent tension, even if only an internal institutional affair, can give rise to major and minor inconsistencies, and no few headaches.

The second conflict is more public and subtle, but no less fierce. By including not only the people who have taken part in a project but the institution's entire human team and, by extension, the structure of its 'protecting' or 'governing' bodies, credit pages constitute a reminder — discreet but persistent — that the fiction we call a museum is framed within a very real structure of authority, one whose consensuses and instabilities, albeit palpable and only indirectly expressed, will be no less stringent or problematic because of that, nor will they cease to exert a direct impact on the

4. Blanga-Gubbay and Piazza, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

5. Gérard Genette, 'Introduction', *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (trans. Jane E. Lewin). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 2 (originally published in French in 1987).

reality of the institution and its team. Credits pages are, in this respect, snapshots that show the ever dynamic relationships of power, balances, privileges and fragilities that connote the system on which the museum-fiction is founded. They portray, frozen outside of time, the tensions at play within it; tensions between reality and fiction, but also between the diverse forces of the institutional apparatus.

This being the case, it is evident that the reason for the existence of credits is connected to their specific moment and their context, from which they can never free themselves.

Or almost never, because all of a sudden, in an unexpected turn, these self-same credits pages, hauled far from their usual discreet position and compiled in a long sequence, have at last become raw material and give shape to this book that you, dear reader, now hold in your hands.

Prepare to be surprised, dear reader. In this book, you will see credits as you have never seen them before: a series of photographic shots which, read transversally, expose ups and downs, appearances, displacements, absences and other barely visible micro-stories, woven together as they are in the warp and weft of the history of this museum-fiction. Moreover, from this unexpected perspective, you might even begin to wonder whether these pages are — like the imaginary films in Sonnemann's *Handbook* — real or made up. And it is likely that this will make you ponder on the fictional status of the museum and remind you — remind us — that the possibility of making up this fiction in many other ways is still there, latent but always open. Ultimately, as Bojana Kunst rightly remarks, an institution 'is not a fact, is not an achievement, but a conditionality, which enables the simultaneity between performing the institution and resisting the very process of institutionalisation.'⁶

6.
Bojana Kunst, 'The Institutionalisation,
Precarity and the Rhythm of Work', 2020,
in [www.kunsten.be/nu-in-de-kunsten/
the-institutionalisation-precarity-and-the-
rhythm-of-work/](http://www.kunsten.be/nu-in-de-kunsten/the-institutionalisation-precarity-and-the-rhythm-of-work/) (accessed 19 March 2021).